When English Meets History: Exploring the Faction Genre through Action Learning

Beth Herbert

ABSTRACT

We were excited by Mark Greenwood, we were entertained by Norman Jorgensen, we were inspired by Kirsty Murray and we were charmed by Diane Wolder in our quest to discover how authors weave facts into their fiction to create faction. Working with these four inspiring authors was part of an action learning project initiated by the Association of Independent Schools of Western Australia (AISWA) and funded by the Australian Government’s Quality Teaching Program (AGQTP). The aims of the project were to engage teachers with the Australian Curriculum: English and the Australian Curriculum: History, to critically read quality literature, to undertake historical inquiry and to create historical narrative. The genre of faction, a mix of fact and fiction, was the vehicle chosen for this, based on a recent classroom experience.

Background

In 2010 a transition centre was established at Bunbury Cathedral Grammar School for the Year 7 cohort. With an emphasis on middle school pedagogy, especially that of ‘developing effective student-centred learning and teaching strategies’ (Dowden, 2012, p. 8), such as integrated curriculum, one teacher taught both English and Society and Environment (S&E). The S&E topic was WA history (not aligned with the Australian Curriculum); its stories and people. Working in small, differentiated groups and using an inquiry approach, students sourced factual material and read supporting literature. Inspired by a visit from Mark Greenwood who stressed the importance of visiting the places where the events took place, they organised a variety of excursions. Some students found people to interview and one boy even handled a bullet-ridden pocketbook and photos from World War 1. This source material is summarised in the table below.

Understandings were demonstrated through dramatic monologue. Students assumed the persona of the character and told his/her story. Rather than simply presenting a collection of facts, students brought their characters to life, demonstrating a high level of analysis, deep empathy and an ability to critically reflect on the role the person played in the shaping of Western Australia.

It was the richness of this approach that provided the idea for ‘When English meets History: Exploring the Faction genre through Action Learning.’

The project

The project involved 24 teachers. They came from a variety of schools (large/small in number, high/low socio-economic backgrounds) with many different religious affiliations (Christian, Anglican, Catholic, Jewish, Islamic) and pedagogical approaches (Montessori, community). There was a mix of year levels (Year 2 to Year 10) and there was a variety of locations (both city and regional).
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Despite such a diverse mix, the outcome was the same; the blending of English and History through either faction or historical fiction proved successful at all levels and in all schools.

The project spanned 12 weeks during which four opportunities for collaboration and professional discourse were provided. This was an important component as research shows that ‘traditional professional development is often insufficient to improve teaching quality’ (Sather, 2009, p. 11).
Day 1
During Day 1, teachers were introduced to the *Australian Curriculum: English* and the *Australian Curriculum: History*, the concept of action learning, the genre of faction, the role of historical inquiry and the creation of narrative.

The action learning model introduced came from the WA Department of Education website (‘Introduction to action learning,’ n.d.) and is one that has been used successfully in schools to address identified needs. It involves five phases:

1. Identify an issue, challenge, opportunity or initiative to address
2. Develop a plan of action
3. Implement the plan of action
4. Describe the effects of the action
5. Evaluate and reflect on the whole process.

The challenge identified was engaging with the *Australian Curriculum: English* and the *Australian Curriculum: History*. The links between the two learning areas are clearly stated. (To locate these statements, select the organisation tab, then links to other learning areas.) After perusing these, the genre of faction seemed a logical connection.

There was much discussion around the word ‘faction’ and its connection to ‘historical fiction’. Braxton (2010, p. 1) provided an initial definition – *Faction, a blend of the words fact and fiction, is used to describe a literary work that is a mix of fact and fiction* – which Knight (2008, p. 18) clarified:

**Historical fiction:** stories set in the past, and sometimes using real people in the background, but with imagined main characters and storyline.

**Faction:** historical fiction with real characters, based on detailed research, with imagined conversations and some imagined people linking the story.

The use of narrative ‘as a key strategy for developing young people’s historical thinking’ (Taylor and Young, 2003, p. 72) was introduced and the five steps involved in historical inquiry (as found in the *Australian Curriculum: History*) were outlined. The historical understandings for each year were discussed.

Non-fiction texts that could support these historical understandings were exhibited. Two invaluable online resources were the National Museum’s ‘Australian Journeys’ collection which explores the stories of migrants to Australia, and Trove, a National Library of Australia compilation of historic Australian newspapers, magazines, photographs, images, music, etc.

Many supporting literary texts were also displayed and teachers left the first day armed with resources, a collection of books to read encompassing both faction and historical fiction and minds buzzing with ideas and questions.
Day 2

Further inspiration came from Day 2, a day spent workshopping with writers Mark Greenwood, Norman Jorgensen, Kirsty Murray and Dianne Wolfer who described their process of historical research and the way they weave fiction between the facts. Their approaches were very similar.

All of them find their inspiration, their ‘spark’ (Greenwood, n.d.), in the world around them, whether it be ‘a dog-eared photo … a nugget of gold, a relic of war, a shipwreck coin’ (Greenwood, n.d.). Hence, the story behind Ned Kelly’s green sash.

Kirsty Murray (n.d.) said:

When I was a kid, I thought that all stories had to come from inside me. Then I discovered that if you look out into the world around you, there are a million fantastic stories just waiting to be told.

The idea for Bridie’s Fire (Murray, 2003) came when Kirsty stumbled across the story of the Earl Grey Orphan Scheme. Between 1848 and 1850, over 4000 girls between the ages of nine and sixteen were taken from the workhouses of Ireland and sent to Australia (Murray, n.d.). Why? What became of them?

Similarly, the idea for Lighthouse Girl (2009) by Dianne Wolfer was sparked by a newspaper article called ‘The Long Goodbye’ (Crichtell, 2005):

Perth man Don Watson tells of his mother, Fay Catherine Howe, daughter of the Breaksea Island lighthouse keeper. She was just 15 and stood on the island signaling to the departing fleet, almost certainly the last human contact with Australia. Numerous postcards came back to Albany from the Middle East, addressed to ‘the little girl on Breaksea Island.’

Just as all four writers find inspiration in the everyday world, they all then embark on rigorous research, visiting the places whenever possible. Mark Greenwood (n.d.) explained: ‘Being in the setting I’m writing about, where the historical events actually occurred, is one of the crucial stages in bringing history to life.’

Dianne Wolfer talked about the countless hours spent interviewing family members, sourcing archival material, tracking down old images and searching through microfilms of Albany Advertiser articles, before even beginning the process of writing. Likewise, Kirsty Murray stressed the importance of research, research, research.

Day 3

As a result of the first two days, teachers felt empowered to begin their journeys. They returned several weeks later and the hype was incredible as they shared their stories so far. By this stage, much of the research had been completed, with many novels and picture books being included. Studying literary texts connected with numerous threads in the Australian Curriculum: English, but particularly:

1. Purpose, audience and structures of different types of texts
2. Sentences and clause level grammar/word level grammar
3. How texts reflect the context of culture and situation in which they were created
4. Features of literary texts.

Thus, students were armed with content, through their historical inquiry, and skills, through critical analysis of literary texts, and ready to begin creating narrative. The Australian Curriculum: English uses the word ‘creating’ as well as ‘writing’ and this was embraced as teachers planned how students would present their stories.
Day 4

The final day was one of celebration. Teachers were asked to prepare a short presentation describing their Action Learning project, including what they had learnt and how the process had impacted on student learning. The creation of narrative was seen in a multitude of ways: picture books, books embedded with QR codes (3D bar codes that act as hyperlinks to a range of digital media), digital narratives, a series of paintings, another of mosaics, dramatic monologues, multi-modal hybrid texts, web pages, plays and shadow puppet shows.

While the project spanned Years 2–10, there was a predominance of teachers from the middle years. Two Year 5 classes explored colonial Australia with one class focusing on local history and another on a lesser known bushranger. Two Year 6 classes looked at the groups of people who migrated to Australia post-Federation while another one explored the experiences of indigenous Australians. A Year 8 class investigated the Vikings and a Year 10 class focused on Australia’s changing identity as a nation. Two stories deserve special mention.

A Year 5 Story: The Mystery of the Deadwater

The early, colonial history of the Vasse region, set in the southwest of Western Australia, was the starting point for one Year 5 inquiry. Using a wide angled lens, an overview of Australia, circa 1830, was provided through the episode of Davey in My Place (Wheatley and Rawlins, 2008). This narrowed to a local context through excursions to the local pioneer cemetery and Wonnerup House, a collection of 19th century farm and school buildings. The purpose of the day was to discover what life was like in the Vasse region during that time period, what significant, local events occurred and who was involved. Discovering family names on headstones led to study of the picture book, *Sam, Grace and the Shipwreck* (Gillespie and Martinez, 2011). The beautiful, descriptive language and imagery were highlighted. When students drafted, edited and published diary entries as if they were Grace Bussell, they incorporated authentic language and elaborated noun groups into their writing.

A non-fiction text, *The Lockeville Legend* (Nelson-Broad, 2002), provided wonderful
insight into early settlement. Through reading excerpts to the class, students learnt about
VOC sailing ships, the drowning and disappearance of a sailor called Vasse, George Layman’s
rocky relationship with local Aborigines, smuggling, lost treasure and murder. The first woman
to be hanged in the Swan River Colony came from Busselton. With a young male accomplice,
she was trying to steal her husband’s treasure chest. Together, they murdered the husband!
A newspaper article from the 1950s was found (‘Search,’ 1959) detailing a search for
a lost vessel, containing treasure, in a quiet backwater of the Vasse River known as the
Deadwater. And, then, a key was produced! The idea of shipwreck, treasure, mayhem and
murder was sown and a narrative was born.

A Year 8 Story: When Cortes Met Montezuma
A Year 8 class explored the Spanish conquest of the Aztecs (1519–1521). The topic not only
fitted in with the Year 8 History curriculum, it allowed for exploring different points of view
and perspectives; part of the Year 8 English curriculum. As well as having all the elements of
a grand and exciting adventure story, the eventual outcome of the encounter, the destruction
of the Aztec Empire, is in itself a puzzle and source of debate among historians. How and
why was a relatively small band of marauding Spaniards, numbering in their hundreds, able
to overcome an established, organised and aggressive empire with its population numbering
in the hundreds of thousands?
The choice of narrative to be produced, a multi-modal, hybrid text, was influenced by
the work of Dianne Wolfer, Mark Greenwood and Gary Crew. All these authors use a mix
of artifacts such as maps, diary and journal entries, letters, pictures and photographs to
support the underlying narrative of their texts. Producing this type of text allowed students
to use their artistic skills and to experiment with their layout and compositional skills when
determining the mix of graphics and text needed to communicate the message(s) contained
not only on each page, but also over the entire text.

The unit of work was broken into seven parts:
• Understanding Aztec Life: In order for students to gain a full understanding of the impact
of the Spanish Conquest of 1519, they needed to explore the Aztec way of life pre-1519. To
do this, student formed pairs and completed a web search. Given a number of headings to
ensure they had a wide range of information, the students were free to browse the web and
take notes under each heading. During this activity, students developed their understanding
of the most effective key words to input into internet search engines to find information.
Following the web search, students were asked to use Google images to find pictures which represented ordinary activities in Aztec life. Students then selected an image and drew it by hand. This was the first piece of work they collected for their books.

Students then listened to, and took notes on a teacher designed PowerPoint presentation. This was followed by a viewing of a YouTube clip titled *Aztec Empire and Culture: interesting facts and anthropology*. As a result of these activities, students were able to broaden their knowledge of Aztec beliefs, customs and way of life. This gave them some empathy for a people whose way of life was to be so drastically altered in the future.

To transform this factual knowledge into a more imaginative and fictional text, the students were asked to create a character and write a diary entry about one day in their life from this character’s point of view. This activity introduced the concept of faction and set the students to thinking about how they could fictionalise their research by creating characters and imaginary events.

- **Understanding the Spanish Conquistadors:** Throughout the unit of work, a key concept was the different points of view on the same historical events. Students were encouraged to understand both perspectives. Documentaries were used to show the students the Spanish Conquistadors’ motivations for exploration of the New World. Both of the following documentaries are free online: *Lost Treasure of the Ancient World – Empires of the Americas* and *The Fall of the Aztecs*. To assist students with the key understandings of the documentaries, a series of questions was completed after each viewing.

These documentaries were followed by a look at ‘The Memoirs of the Conquistador Bernal Diaz Del Castillo’ (Diaz, 1963). It is a simply written, firsthand account of Cortes’ expedition to Mexico. Students read through extracts, highlighting the main ideas. They used this information to write a letter from Cortes’ perspective. In this letter they described the circumstances that led to his appointment as Commander in Chief of the expedition, what he hoped to gain from the expedition and, finally, to persuade his friends to lend him money to fund the expedition. Using a wide range of texts assisted students in understanding the differences between primary and secondary sources and also how and why they might contain different information.

- **Mapping the Journey:** Once students had established how the Aztecs lived before the Spanish arrived, and the reasons the Spanish set out on their explorations, they researched Cortes’ expedition to Mexico and some of the key interactions between the natives and
the Spanish. Much of this information had been introduced in an earlier documentary but to remind the students of the main dates and events, they researched two websites that showed timelines of the Spanish conquest of Mexico (or Tenochtitlan, as it was then called). Students were asked to annotate a map with the key dates and events in Cortes’ march from Santa Cruz to Tenochtitlan, using information from the websites. During this activity, students developed basic mapping skills as well as becoming familiar with the location and names of relevant places. This activity was a great follow up to the documentary, *The Fall of the Aztecs*, which included a reconstruction of the same journey.

- **Different Perspectives:** A particular event for which there are two differing interpretations was the massacre of 3000 Indians at Cholula. It was very important for the students to understand that when studying history there is usually bias in any account of an historical event, and quite often a particular reason for that bias. A YouTube clip, *The Spanish Conquest of Mexico – Cholula Part 1 & 2*, offered two accounts of the massacre and showed the students what sources were used to create these perspectives. It also showed who wrote these sources, and what reasons they would have had for telling the story their way. Whilst viewing the clip, the students took notes using a T-Chart framework. They then retold each side of the story using thought bubbles and images of Cortes and Montezuma to illustrate the difference between the Aztec and Spanish perspectives.

- **The Impact of the Conquest:** The final aspect of teaching the history of this event was to look at the impact the Spanish conquest had on the lives of both the Spanish and the Aztecs. It became apparent that although many students liked the idea of exploration and adventure, they could appreciate the negative impact this had on the native population. Due to time constraints, much of this information was given to the class as a factual information sheet which outlined the changes for both the Spanish and the Aztecs. The students had to imagine that the Spanish had imposed 10 new rules on the Aztec people once they overruled them. The rules had to reflect the changes outlined in the information sheet. Many students wrote about the impact of disease and the introduction of new species as well as Aztec gold being exported to Spain. The students empathised with a population that had become enslaved and marginalised.

- **Creating Narrative:** Although the students had written many ‘historical documents’ for their books, they still had to weave a fictional narrative, choosing to write about a character from either the Spanish or the Aztec peoples. Some decided to keep the same character they had written a diary entry about earlier in the term and others decided to invent someone entirely new. The narrative had to be written from a third person point of view. Other than this, they were free to invent a story of their own, providing it was historically accurate and included some interactions between the Spanish and the Aztecs. The variety of stories the students produced was amazing. From young Spanish soldiers making their way in life, to Aztec slaves fighting for their freedom or Aztec warriors redeeming their past failures – the ‘fictional’ motivations of their characters was astounding.

- **Putting the Book Together:** The students loved the practical nature of creating a book. Books such as *Lasseter’s Reef* (Crewe, 2000) and *Lighthouse Girl* (Wolfer, 2010) were analysed to show that historical documents could tell as much of the story as the narrative itself. As a result, the narrative did not have to include every single detail. Instead, students tried to match the letters, maps and diary entries to the most appropriate parts of their narrative.

The narrative did, however, have to stand out as a single unifying thread in the book, so students printed their narrative in a particular colour. With a few design principles in place, such as leaving the first page blank for an inner title page, the students went to work creating their stories.
Conclusion
As noted by Sather (2009) earlier in the paper, the provision of ongoing professional learning during the teachers’ journeys results in quality teaching practices. This was certainly evident through this Action Learning experience:

1. It provided an opportunity for teachers to engage with the *Australian Curriculum: English* and the *Australian Curriculum: History* to plan and implement a cross-curricular unit of work.
2. It introduced teachers to the success of an action research model that they could use as a tool for reflecting on and responding to current practice.
3. It connected teachers and authors in professional discourse about the craft of writing, especially historical narrative.
4. It allowed teachers to explore the concept of historical inquiry. In primary classes, in particular, students have not engaged in depth with history and this method generated many comments about how it encouraged students to ask questions and take control of their research.
5. It encouraged teachers to embrace the notion of ‘creating’ as opposed to writing narrative. Being innovative with presentation also meant students developed in other areas, such as ICT capability, critical and creative thinking and the arts.
6. It provided a forum for teachers to articulate how their new knowledge and changed teaching practices improved student learning through the ‘Show and Tell’ day.
7. Perhaps, most importantly, it provided opportunities for discussion with, and feedback from, colleagues from other, very different schools. Participants became a community of learners:

   Such communities engage individuals in collective work and bring them into contact with other people and possibilities. These settings provide opportunities for teachers to reflect critically on their practice, thus creating new knowledge and beliefs about teaching and learning. (Hord, 1997)

In summary, the project, ‘When English Meets History: Exploring the faction genre through Action Learning’ proved extremely successful. As a participating teacher observed:

I think that faction has empowered my students to write narratives that both educate and entertain. My students have ‘grown up’ from just writing magical fiction and ‘feel good’ stories. Their narratives have grit! (R. Newman, personal communication, November, 2011).

And what an example of ‘grit’ to finish with:

**Shiny Red Shoes**

The train wheels squealed, as I held on tight to the rusted door handle. Then I was shunted forward and the train headed west. I stood terrified watching my mum on the platform camouflaged into the background of the dark night. I pressed my check upon the fogged up window, but as hard as I was trying, I could not see her beautiful face anymore. I paused. I couldn’t understand why I was leaving the camp where my big, happy family had brought me up. Turning to my left I stared into my brother’s eyes searching for answers but all I found was uncertainty. Eventually, I lay down on the train floor, shut my eyes and wondered what the future would bring.

The journey seemed to last for hours. The train was hot, filled with a musky smell. In the morning light, I pushed my body against the steel door for the hundredth time. There was nothing to see except for red dirt and a few shrubs along the railway tracks.

A long time later, the train was weaving through a silver city, filled with cars, high-rise buildings and more people than I have ever seen in my eight years. My stomach dropped, butterflies circled,
my head started to spin. Very soon a hand took my arm and escorted me off the train. Bright lights hit my face, noise that I have never heard before rung in my ears.

I looked at the ground and all I could see were hundreds of pairs of shoes walking by. I had never seen so many people wearing shoes in my life.

The only familiar thing around me was my brother. We stood side-by-side holding hands.

The longest ten minutes I had ever had to wait finally passed. We stood extremely still like tin soldiers waiting. A lady in a suit introduced herself to another lady before approaching us. One of them walked to my brother and the other walked to me. She bent down so we were at eye level, both as nervous as each other. She politely said, ‘I’m your new mother.’

I looked the lady up and down. She had fair hair, blue eyes and pale skin. Then as I looked down at her feet I saw she was wearing shiny red, high-heeled shoes. Then I looked at my own bare brown feet, dusty with the red dirt of home.

It was the first time, not the last time, I would feel ashamed of the colour of my skin.

References

References (Year 5 story)
References (Year 8 story)

Literature cited

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